DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 062 886 FL 003 226

AUTHOR Blanchet, Alain
TITLE Le Laboratoire de Langues - Hier, Aujord'hui et Demain (The Language Laboratory: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow).
PUB DATE Nov 71
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association of Teachers of French, Washington, D.C., November 1971

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Individualized Instruction; *Instructional Improvement; Instructional Program Divisions; *Language Instruction; Language Laboratories; *Language Laboratory Use; *Magnetic Tape Cassette Recorders; Modern Languages; Multimedia Instruction; Relevance (Education); Second Language Learning; Student Attitudes; *Student Motivation; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Observing that the use of the language laboratory has declined during recent years, the author proceeds to explore ways in which interest in language study may be revived and how foreign language instruction may be made more relevant. Discussion of the cognitive-code learning theory and of individualized instruction suggests the use of the portable cassette recorder. With imaginative application, the author feels the cassette recorder will allow the lockstep in program articulation to be broken. (RL)

ED 062 886

LE LABORATOIRE DE LANGUES - HIER, AUJOURD'HUI ET DEMAIN - Alain Blanchet

Who and what fool would undertake such an ambitious task, especially in a half hour? It did not take me long to come to this realization and yet I felt that I had something to say. But who would dare lecture to teachers about a tool which they already know so well, a tool which they have used for so many years? And w ho would dare play prophet at a time when our society, the young and their education are evolving so fast?

"Le Laboratoire de Langues Demain". Here is something to talk about, something of concern to most of us, something we must discuss. But how can you deal with the future without looking at the present and the past? So here is "Le Laboratoire de Langues, Hier, Aujourd'hui et Demain".

The future should be of burning interest to all of us for our future, the future of that to which we have dedicated our careers appears to be somewhat in jeopardy. We should all have seen the symptoms of this crisis around us, some of us may have felt them - a drop in enrollment at all levels; lack of enthusiasm and even interest in students; attacks on our programs from communities, students and administrators. As a junior high school chairman I have been perhaps among those most sensitive to these new trends because at t he junior high school level we are most expendable. But no matter

FL003 229

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

what level we teach, may it be elementary, secondary or college, this concerns us all. This is a time for change, for re-evaluation, and probably reorganization, and we the teachers should be the ones to initiate that change. Most of us are aware of this situation. Even if we do not attend teacher workshops and conferences, we read their announcements and know their topics. We know that problems are being studied: how to revive a waning interest in foreign language study; how to make the foreign language curriculum more "relevant". If you have seen none of these signs, let me relate to you a small incident I experienced a few weeks ago.

A speaker came to address our entire faculty. He is a prominent educator but I shall not name him. I agreed at first with his progressive thinking and his questioning of traditionally accepted concepts and procedures until I was shocked by his blunt statement that the first thing which should be removed from the curriculum in any school, not our school in particular but any school, was foreign language. His reasoning went an all-too-common way today: Why spend so much money on such a program when we know that after four, six or more years of study, the larger proportion of students remain quite incompetent in the skills which they are supposed to have acquired? This is proved, he added, by the eight-year study which has been swept under a rug

where he intends to retrieve it. Why spend so much time to achieve results which might be surpassed by sending interested students to France for ten weeks or so?

The real problem is that the man is right, at least to some degree in some of his statements. I like to believe that the gentleman's shotgun approach to the situation was designed less to eliminate us and our programs than to move us to rethink our goals and methods.

So here we are, in 1971. Our effectiveness is being questioned. Our clientele is dwindling, no longer forced to "put in" the required number of years on the benches of our classes to gain access to the better things of this academic world. All around us in schools, the stress is often placed upon concepts and attitudes which are developped through the pleasant process of discussion, reading, "rapping". How are we FL teachers going to promote skills which can only be acquired at the cost of long practice and show relatively little promise of immediate usefulness?

Many have undertaken the task of answering that question. So many are presently involved in research and experimentation that it would be impossible to report on all their progress and their findings. Besides, I never intended this report to be that kind of research paper but rather a statement of my personal convictions which, I hope, will contribute to their work by supporting it.

About a year ago, the New York State Bureau of Foreign Language Education, then under the direction of Mr. Paul Glaude, addressed a memorandum to all foreign language teachers in that state. This memorandum, based upon the reports of several emminent advisory panels, puts it all together in what I consider to be the best, most consistent proposal for the 1970's. It creates an opportunity for the cognitive code-learning theory and allows for the flexibility which should result from opening the classroom. Basically it amounts to a workable blueprint for the future. In addition to new teaching techniques, it proposes an alternative to the traditional lock step concept of progress and outlines possibilities for a new foreign language technology.

What is the place of the foreign language laboratory in this new order? As long as we try to teach communication skills to our students without regularly sending them en masse overseas, we will need a device to expand the contact time between master and student. The concept of differentiated staffing may provide an answer. The field of electronics will most certainly continue to serve us with some form of mechanical master, language laboratory or whatever we may choose to call it. What will it be? How shall we use it?

A pause is in order at this time to take a brief look at the language laboratory and its past.

I suppose that as soon as mechanical sound production became a possibility, its potential application to education and more specifically to the teaching of foreign languages must have become obvious. As a matter of fact, the first language course was recorded in England in 1904 on an Edison cylinder. In 1918, C.C. Clark of Yale had worked long enough with this application of science to establish the principles which still govern the use of language labs today. The first lab to provide for recording of the students' responses was installed in 1929 at Middlebury. Then came the tape, paper at first - then plastic, and then NDEA which made it possible for just about any school district in this country to have its own shiny language laboratory.

The early laboratory was not too different from the one we know today with perhaps less chrome, foam padding, check lights and possibilities. But it was used then for the same basic reasons as today.

1) This device provides students with an authentic tireless and even-tempered master which will perform in the same good French over and over again in the same pleasant, unperturbed voice, no matter what the student's response may be. What teacher will claim such unflinching stoicism?

2) It multiplies instructional time by getting all students to perform individually at the same time as if each was working directly with the master.

3) It allows for evaluation, self-evaluation for the student who listens to his recorded responses,or teacher evaluation by way of monitoring.

I will not attempt to start listing all the possibilities available through the lab. Mr. LeBlanc, I am sure, will expand on this.

Until now, in a traditional audio-lingual program, the language laboratory remains a very essential tool, but a tool for reenforcement, not for presentation. Its use should therefore be very carefully planned and timed in the learning sequence. And yet we see today a very real decline in its use. The language lab has often fallen in sad neglect through abuse and misuse. It has been abused by students who will pull out its entrails, causing it to buzz, screech, spew out sparks and eventually expire. It has been misused by teachers who had hoped to find in it some magical teaching machine. Many are now disappointed because it failed them, and it failed them because they failed to recognize the limits of its potential.

Too often, in a traditional lock-step progress situation, the

timing of use of the lab is dictated more by the schedule than by need. Lab reenforcement sometimes precedes presentation because "today is our turn at the lab and we will not get another chance at it until next Wednesday". So says the schedule!

This brings up the problem of the availability of the lab. There is all too often one language laboratory per school serving many teachers and many more students. The electronic classroom represents an attempt at solving this problem by producing less expensive systems with limited possibilities.

Labs built in the early 60's are getting older and their maintenance more costly. They are no longer the showcase of modern technology which school districts were eager to display some years ago. Teachers have swung back from the extremes of audiolingualism which necessitated the lab. No study has been able to prove a definitely positive corrolation between use of the language laboratory and overall improvement of language achievement levels. Many language labs have now anded up behind locked doors gathering dust.

Could it be that the students' abuse of the laboratories is in some way related to his frustration and dissatisfaction with the programs?

How many "good students" who find lab sessions to be successful, rewarding experiences fiddle away knobs, jacks and plugs?

Could the misuse of laboratories be traced back to the rigid scheduling of laboratory sessions - the direct result of lock step progress through the curriculum?

The proposed solutions for the 1970's carry deep implications concerning language laboratories. By definition, any program in which the teacher becomes a "manager" of instruction rather than an "orchestrator" or "drillmaster" assumes that individual students will have to look somewhere else for the bulk of their exposure to the foreign language. Programmed self-instruction implies the same conclusions. So in my opinion, the programs proposed for the 1970's will dictate a yet greater reliance of some type of electronic device.

The break from lock step progress towards self instruction and individualized learning seems a certainty for the future. Whether the cognitive code learning theory supplants the audiolingual habit theory, whatever form the students' practice may take, the teacher should not expect to act as the only model for the student. He will have to rely on something else. And I remain convinced that the quality of the results is a direct function of the amount

of exposure with proper help and guidance.

Problems are numerous. Too many labs do not have full record-and-playback possibility at the student position to allow self-pacing. When these positions exist, they are too small in number to accommodate all students. Their use is further limited by the time and place factor, all the equipment being permanently installed in one room, not available to the student when he needs it, where he needs it.

Not only may students eventually be expected to progress at their own rate through the same programmed materials, but the programs themselves may have to be tailored to each student's learning capability, learning style and interest. Those programs may vary from programs aiming at total control of communication skills to some involving a very slight linguistic content, and any level in between.

What shape will the lab take in such a student-centered program?

The New York State Bureau of Foreign Languages foresees a possible future for "Computer Assisted Instruction" (CAI) with a network of student consoles tied into an undetermined number of regional central computer facilities. A most appealing plan which may very well become a reality earlier

than I think but at any rate, it does not appear feasible for the day after tomorrow on a large national scale.

In the meantime, what do we do?

There is available today a little piece of equipment which many students already own and which may provide an answer: the cassette recorder. Many teachers are already using it, some with great imagination and success. I recently attended a conference where Mr. Agatstein of the Wheatley School on Long Island demonstrated the wonders he is accomplishing thanks to this little machine. I am sure that many more are already working in this direction.

I see the cassette recorder as the intrical part of the foreign language learning center.

What is the learning center? It is not a language classroom, it is not a laboratory, it is not a library or a supply storage room, it is not a study hall nor a lounge but all of those put together. It is a place where learning sources are available to students; teachers, tutors; texts, workbooks, program materials, unipacs, tapes, records, film strips, films, newspapers, magazines - whatever may help the student. This includes equipment to use these learning sources: record players, tape recorders, projectors

and viewers of all sorts and cassette recorders in sufficient numbers. The cassette recorder offers the individual student the same capabilities as a language lab in a very small portable unit.

The cassette recorder is compact and light, it can be toted about like a book, thus allowing the lab to break through the confines of the four walls which traditionally contained the electronic equipment.

Like a book, which can be used in the library or checked out, the cassette recorder and cassettes can be used in the learning center or checked out to be used when needed - even at home if necessary. The student who signs it out assumes responsibility for it. This still implies the possibility of damage and costly repairs, but should this stop us if we think that it may help solve other more urgent problems? Besides, don't we already have maintenance problems with our existing labs?

The tape is relatively safely tucked away in the cassette. Most kids already know how to operate the machine. Many already have their own and all should be made aware that a cassette recorder will be of great value to them particularly if they go on to college. And think of all the fun derived from being able to record things other than foreign languages as

well.

I may sound like a salesman at this point: I would like to assure you that I am not and will not even mention any brand name. I do not even own any stock in any electronics industry! I simply think that the profession should make use of all technical helps available and perhaps even demand from the economy that it produce specialized instruments.

The average cassette recorder should do for now but eventually we may need something better adapted to language learning conditions. We will need an instrument designed for the specific role we expect it to play in the language learning process.

The specifications for such an instrument should include some of the features of the existing language laboratory equipment.

It should offer good fidelity. This involves the quality of both the machine and the tape used.

It should offer the possibility of playing a master track and recording the student's responses simultaneously on another track of the same cassette. This will allow the student to monitor and evaluate his own performance.

It should be equipped with a good quality earphone-microphone headset combination which will insulate the student from external sound interference while working.

If this machine is available the problem remains of finding instructional materials published under adequate form. Very few if any complete learning sequences in foreign language have been published with an audio complement recorded on cassettes.

Supplementary materials in cassettes are becoming more common. More and more companies, aware of the potential of the cassette, are publishing those materials in that form. The immediate solution seems to be to make up our materials, an extremely time-consuming process. Let us not of course leave it up to the publishing companies to decide what and how we are going to teach. We must make them aware of our needs. They will publish what we need because we constitute their market.

Although the cassette recorder offers a good solution to the problems posed by the implementation of continuous progress programs, self-instruction programs, individualized learning programs, it should by no means be considered the only one at this point. Any tool or system which allows us to break

from the lock step progress should be seriously considered. Any device which makes it possible for each student to learn at his own rate, according to his own style and potential will contribute to solving the crisis in foreign language education today. If in this way, language learning can be made into a more personally rewarding experience for the student,he will naturally want to carry it out as far as he can, generating his own motivation and assuming responsibility for his own learning.

Forced attrition and dropout rates may be seriously reduced. Levels of achievement may be enhanced. All of this is not going to be achieved by a language lab alone, a program alone. The hardware is only there to be used with wisdom. No machine, even electronic, holds any magic. It will not perform any miracle. The tool is available, we are accountable for what we do with it.

The answer, in the long run, is not to be found in the field of technology or even learning theory, but in the human element of teacher attitude toward the learner, recognizing in each student a unique individual and treating him as such. Technology perhaps can help us achieve this.

"The more languages a man knows, he is so many more times a man."- Charles V